

WHERE COURAGE IS FOUND

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As part of an Art History course about Photography, students were asked to write a series of reflective journals. One of the goals of this assignment was to help students develop their written voice, an important skill in building a robust academic language.

In this selection of journals titled “WHERE COURAGE IS FOUND” the writer has found a common thread, namely, courage. In “When the Family Photo Album Isn’t Picture Perfect”, the writer revisits a family photo album that documents some of her father’s experiences in Norway during World War II. “Angry Broad Brush, a reflection on Angela Kelly’s essay ‘SELF IMAGE Personal is political’ considers how we have come to expect narrowly defined norms in photographic images. “Enlightened” looks at the work of a female photojournalist and asks, does it make a difference if the photographer is male or female?

“If students—especially basic writing students—are to acquire academic language in a meaningful, powerful way, the emphasis on exploring ideas in personal, expressive language cannot be neglected.”¹

As part of our work in an Art History course about photography, we were asked to write a series of reflective journals. The assignment was both deceptively challenging and incredibly rewarding. In the journal “When the Family Photo Album Isn’t Picture Perfect” I revisit an old family photo album that was usually kept from public view. The photographs document the courage of a young man fighting for his country and the album made for an important lesson: a lesson where

¹Mlynarczyk, *Revisiting the Debate*, 12.

immigrant parents taught their daughters that being foreign was not a source of shame, but their family history was a source of pride.

When the Family Photo Album Isn't Picture Perfect

Our personal photographs play an important role in our image building. Who are we? Who do we aspire to be? What are our lives supposed to look like? We humans are very concerned with how we are viewed, how and where we fit in social groups. We present the image we think ought to or should be portrayed. But is it so wrong when the picture doesn't fit neatly into the usual social conventions? What do we make of it when a family photo album isn't 'picture perfect'?

These questions have been crossing my mind since I was a young girl. Growing up, there was one photo album that was often tucked away. That was the one that I found most fascinating, the one that Mom didn't really want us getting into as she knew it might lead to difficult questions. As it was 'not suitable for young ladies', if I had any questions I would need to keep them to myself.

The album was one that my father brought with him when he immigrated from Norway. Most of the photos span his adolescence, and as he was born in 1925, his teenage years were during the Nazi occupation in WWII. Like many other Norwegians, he actively resisted the occupation. His specialty was radio communications and when the Nazis became suspicious of his activities, he had to flee his hometown. His escape route took him from his home in the southeast, north through the middle of Norway and eventually east to escape into Sweden. The photo album documents this time. What he and others did was dangerous work, not only for themselves but for those close to them. While the Nazis hunted for my father, they held his mother and sister house hostage, and sent his father to a detention camp. What he did was remarkable, but what is more remarkable is that he was one of the thousands of Norwegians who actively resisted the Occupation. He died many years ago so there are few traces remaining, the photos and the memories retold by relatives in the old country. It's been decades since I've had a good look at this album and given the nature of our studies, it seems fitting to see what this album tells me now.

The pictures. A desolate spot in the mountains. Young men build onto a log cabin. Interior shots of a radio communication post. Groups of men, friends posing for the camera, men in uniform, sometimes in formation. Candid, posed, working, basking in the sun but revolver safely in hand. The countryside changing from lush mountains to a treeless north marked by snow fences. The difficult pictures. Pictures of people excavating corpses from dirt graves and giving the lifeless bodies the dignity of a box for burial. The sad ones of a cemetery filled with countless

fresh white crosses. The photos filled with pride. A welcome home parade, dignitaries walking with war heroes. Women and children smiling, crowds of people waving the Norwegian flag.

What did these photos mean to the teenage boy that took them? Why are they so important to me? These photos document an aspect of WWII that is not well known and not expected to be found in a personal family album. They are not the usual stuff of happy, joyous or silly celebrations of family life. Had my parents left this album out with all the others, they would have faced stern judgement for their sense of decency, and further scrutinized for their oddness and egotism. And, while I agree these photos may not be for casual viewing, I think they are important. What happened during that young man's adolescence was unusual and shocking. This album may have provided a way for him to resolve the trauma from these events. It helps me to better understand the past. Had it not been for this album I would have missed an incredible example of courage and decency, of setting aside personal interests for the sake of country, and that it is not the efforts of one, but of many. These photos document the power and tenacity of brave people. Yes, there is a place for the light-hearted family photos. But there is a place for the albums that document our lives beyond the picture perfect. This album has shown me that we can be much more than just a shiny image.

Looking at the work of two well-regarded photographers, I find there is more to their work than the photographs alone.

Angry Broad Brush

A reflection on Angela Kelly's essay "SELF IMAGE Personal is Political"

In reading Angela Kelly's essay "SELF IMAGE Personal is Political" I find myself stumbling over a few areas. This essay intends "to dispel a few myths and raise a few questions about photographic self-portraiture"² and to consider this from the perspective of the "photographic self-portraitist."³ It was not until the third or fourth reading and a detour to see if 'The Personal is Political' is a thing that this essay begins making more sense to me, but with what seems to be a few departures from the original intent. My understanding of 'The Personal is Political' is as a slogan from the time of second-wave feminism. It was calling attention to issues about

²Kelly, *Self Image: Personal is Political*, 410.

³Kelly, 410.

women's health, what we call 'woman's work', and that these issues need to be brought out and dealt with within a political context.

After multiple readings, I'm left feeling that Kelly views the world in black and white with but a few patches of grey. This essay mentions issues that seem to be distant from the original intent, issues such as self-portraiture is acceptable to the artist but not the photographer, that either claim to illustrate what lies beneath versus capturing the likeness and that it is "contradictory for women to see themselves as persons before women."⁴ These are all problematic for me, possibly due to what small strides have been made since the article was written, or possibly that at this point in my life I am less inclined to play nice and buy into those kinds of sexist notions.

I appreciate her bringing attention to the myth that contrary to what we may often see in photographic print, not all women are young, slender, flawless and eager for a sexual encounter. Let's challenge the status quo and raise a few questions. To that end, take the image of a provocatively posed woman and replace her with a man. Yes, that pose is ludicrous, and it is not representative of most women. And what was she thinking to turn the camera on herself and claim herself as worthy to be the centre of attention? It would be a few years after Kelly's essay, but I think it's fair to credit Madonna as the trailblazer and fierce protector of feminine narcissism.

It is interesting to see Kelly's exploration of photographic self-portraiture and how her images have matured over the course of time. There is one that I find very powerful. It looks to be from when she was a younger woman, standing in a flowery print dress, partially hidden in the shadows. The light streams in from a large window on the left-hand side, the light so bright it nearly overexposes an ad painted on the exterior wall. Only a portion of the ad is visible, LES & SER, it leaves me wondering if she may be feeling 'lesser', or perhaps she is ready to leave her lesser self and step into her power.

Kelly's article reminds me of some of my own experiences. I was a young career woman around her 'lesser' time and I cannot forget shocking levels of sexist behaviour that were accepted if not tolerated. It was not unexpected to have male coworkers try to put girls into their place, but it was crushing when female coworkers would try to keep you from reaching beyond their interpretation of a woman's proper place.

Hopefully, the passage of time has been as good to Kelly as it has been to me. The process of aging is not for sissies but there is a lovely freedom in being a cranky (dare we say bitchy) mature woman. It is far easier in these autumn years to call out

⁴Kelly, 416.

the bullshit. Better yet, there is less time to bellyache about a countless number of inequities for, wherever possible, I grab what I can of what is rightfully mine.

Enlightened

One of the benefits of our studies is learning about photographers that were previously not known to us. As women are underrepresented in the photographic industry, I now seek them out intentionally. It's a small way to help get us to a more equitable balance. A search of female photographers led me to Time Inc.'s "Women in Photography: 34 Voices from Around the World"⁵. It is unfortunate to read that only 15% of the entrants to the World Press Photo Contest are female. It is also a bit disconcerting that some classify photographic styles based on sex. Art historian and curator Val Williams believes there is a distinct difference in the way that women photographers approach documenting versus that of men, and perhaps there is, but does that male-female classification serve us well? Unless specific sex organs are required to produce or consider photographic work, do we really need to support that type of stratification? Can we not leave it at: different photographers have different perspectives, and accept that their perspectives may change over the course of time? As viewers, is a better approach is to seek out various points of view and in doing so, come to know a larger body of photographic work? The article about these talented photographers, all of them names that are new to me, does not disappoint. After a cursory review of extraordinary work, I've settled on Meridith Kohut. What I see brings me to tears.

The subjects covered in these photo-essays are rich and moving. A photojournalist by trade, Kohut is a regular contributor to The New York Times, a publication I hold in high regard. Much of her work relates to issues within Latin America. These assignments put the photographer into some very precarious and potentially hostile situations. Of particular note I'm deeply moved by her photo essay about the shortage of drugs for patients in a Venezuelan psychiatric hospital. I'm reminded of our course text and its reference to Gerry Badger's BBC television series, where the subtitle reads "How photography has changed our lives"⁶. It is through these photo-essays that I, as a viewer, am able to witness worlds I otherwise would not see.

The power of these essays is more than the subject matter. Without question, the skill of the photographer in capturing and composing the images is crucial to the viewing experience. And there are several decisions made during post-production

⁵Time Inc., *Women in Photography: 34 Voices from Around the World*.

⁶Wells, ed. *Photography*, 60-61.

that make for richer storytelling. Specific choices made in editing, cropping and employing colour schemes add to the overall impact, creating more drama and leading the viewer. These visual stories feel complete.

There is a sense of integrity in these photo-essays. The subjects are presented as they are. I am seeing something that is beyond my day to day world, but it does not feel like there is an intention to classify them as lesser than us. The photographs provide a vivid visual story of people and their circumstances, and it is achieved without a condescending perspective, condemnation or victimizing. The aftermath of an act of God, a country in tatters, a society losing hope, a hospital without the tools to provide care. These stories are rich. What would the photographer have me do? Karin Becker Ohrn points out “The photographer’s goal was to bring the attention of an audience to the subject of his or her work and, in many cases, to pave the way for social change.”⁷ Kohut’s body of work has the power to do just that.

Conclusion

Looking back over these journals, there is a constant thread about courage. Courage is found in the photo-essays of a photojournalist, the questions posed by a feminist, a young man’s efforts for his country and the lessons taught about finding pride in your heritage. But it is more than the just the journals. From the audacity of an instructor who assigned this unconventional task, to the personal effort of digging deep and expressing ideas, it is evident that courage has been found.

⁷Wells, 79.

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